**Examining armed self-defense of black women from 1955-1975**

In recent years, civil rights scholars have written about the use of armed self-defense by participants in the southern freedom struggle. However, many of these studies focus on black men and relegate women to mere paragraphs or footnotes. This essay begins the study of the "fascinating and useful subject," as historian Lance Hill put it, of women's role "in the self-defense movement."[1] The main focus of this essay is on acts of armed self-defense practiced by black women, such as Mabel Williams, women affiliated with the Deacons for Defense and Justice, Black Panther women, and numerous others during the freedom struggle, between the years of 1955 and 1975.

In order to analyze armed self-defense by black women, it is important to establish a historical context. Harriet Tubman, a "conductor" of the underground railroad, carried a pistol to fend off possible attacks from slavecatchers, and helped hundreds of enslaved "men, women and children" escape from the South.[2] While she never used her pistol in self-defense, Tubman served as a symbol of resistance against slavery, a warrior, and guerrilla fighter.[3] Before the Civil War, some black female fugitive slaves fired back at slavecatchers and, in Christiana, Pennsylvania, in 1851, dozens of black men and women armed with guns, corn cutters, scythe blades, staves, clubs, and stones, repelled slaveholders and their allies.[4] In the decades after the Civil War, blacks organized into Union Leagues and other groups, leading to black codes which restricted black gun use; much of the rhetoric around

1 Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 290. The fact that Hill stuck this, as a footnote, at the end of his book is not only significant but questions if he is being truly sincere. If he is being sincere, then this paper fulfills his suggestion.

2 Cobb, Jr., *On the Road to Freedom*, xviii; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 35; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 44; PBS, "Harriet Tubman"; About.com; "Harriet Tubman"; Rimensynder, "Disarming Harriet Tubman"; Alewitz, "The Dreams of Harriet Tubman"; Stiehm, "Tubman mural with musket rejected."

3 Bennett, "Harriet Tubman Pistol & Sword on Display at FAMU"; Eolis, "John Brown called her 'General Tubman'"; Harriet Tubman Historical Society, "Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people"; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 146.

4 Kerr-Ritchie, "Rehearsal for War," 7; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 47; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 135. For the female slave fugitives firing back at slave catchers, see an 1855 illustration, which shows a black woman in a dress firing at white slave catchers approaching a wagon. Some female slaves, just like some male slaves, also defended themselves against physical assault by "abusive masters" (see Strain, *Pure Fire*, 10). During the Civil War, black women "served as nurses, spies, and scouts" (see Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 70, 74; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed,* 41). At the same time, 200,000 black men served in the Union army.

black armed self-defense was masculinist in nature.[5] In 1892, anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells famously argued that mob violence was abated when "blacks exercised manly self-defense" because "a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give."[6] In the years up to 1955, black women defended themselves with "handy" rifles, or with pistols against physical assault or harassment by white men.[7] By 1955, a "black tradition of arms," as gun rights advocate Nicholas Johnson terms it, had developed, with local men and "more than a few women" taking up arms for self-defense "as a practical necessity."[8]

**"Now at last the story is being told": Mabel Williams and armed self-defense**

Mabel Robinson, a native of Monroe, North Carolina, grew up in a society where black people were expected to stay in their place.[9] Her parents, in her recollection, told her to stay in her place and to not run into "trouble with white people" in a society that was "racist to the core."[10] This changed after

5 New York Times, "The Tennessee Election"; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 18, 20; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 78; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 46; Memphis Avalanche, "War in Arkansas"; Summers, *The Ordeal of Reunion*, 121-2; Williams, "Lynched, Burned Alive, Jim-Crowed...in My Country," 131.

6 Holt, "The Lonely Warrior," 45; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 147; Witt, "Picking up the Gun and Serving the People," 15; Cottrol and Diamond, "The Second Amendment," 353; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 21; Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 224; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 11; Wells-Barrnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 62; Wells-Barnett, "Self Help," 51-2. Wells even purchased a pistol to defend herself against lynchers after a lynching occurred.

7 Bieto and Bieto, *Black Maverick*, 4; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 36, 57; McLaughlin, "Ghetto Formation and Armed Resistance in East St. Louis, Illinois," 466-7; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 147, 156, 244; NAACP, "Crime," 145; NAACP, "Political," 185. These instances included the "handy" rifles kept by housewives in Murray County, Kentucky in the early 1900s, "Aunt Lou" with a Krag Rifle in 1907, women engaging in self-defense during the East St. Louis riot in 1919, and an all-black women's rifle team at Howard University in the 1940s. The NAACP's flagship publication, *The Crisis* noted numerous instances of women defending themselves in the early half of the twentieth-century. These included a black woman shooting a white man for robbery, and a black woman, Lily Hill, shooting a white man for assaulting her. Other black women who defended themselves, during that time, with guns included seventy-year-old "Black" Mary Fields, also known as Stagecoach Mary, and Leola Blackmon.

8 Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 63, 78; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 376; Johnson, *Negroes and the* Gun, 13, 29, 48, 147, 163; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 6; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 1. This "tradition" meant that there was hardly a black home in the South "without a shotgun or rifle," especially in rural areas, mainly for hunting purposes. The organic "tradition of armed self-defense" that developed in the South, with self-defense "widespread and commonplace" but rarely extended "to public spaces and demonstrations" (see Ogbar, *Black Power*, 69; Crosby, "It wasn't the Wild West," 197; Bowder, *Her Best Shot*, 148; Pascoe, "The Monroe Rifle Club," 395 for details). While armed self-defense to some degree represented a "man's duty," black women subverted such traditional gender roles by implementing "defensive measures to protect their homes, bodies, and families" (see Strain, *Pure Fire*, 180; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 175, 194-6 for details).

9 Since the late 1990s, civil rights scholars such as Timothy Tyson have brought Robert F. Williams, an advocate of armed self-defense, out of obscurity. However, in the process, the words and actions of his wife, Mabel Williams, have not received equal attention. This section of this essay aims to reverse this trend by focusing on the role of Mabel Williams and her use of armed self-defense.

10 Interview with Mabel Williams by David S. Cecelski on August 20, 1999.

she met Robert F. Williams, whom she later married. This “handsome, tall dashing young man” was “a little standoffish” due to his rejection of social norms of black people, especially those of the black middle-class people, which showed her that not “all black folks were subservient...to white folks,” allowing to realize she could be her own person.[11]

In the 1950s, Robert, Mabel and others in the Monroe, North Carolina community organized a rifle club to defend themselves from Ku Klux Klan attacks. The rifle club's membership's base consisted of members of the local NAACP, headed by Robert, which consisted of housewives, “fed-up” local working-class people and veterans, with the latter forming the bulk of leadership.[12] The strong presence of the Klan in the Monroe community was countered by this rifle club, passing itself off as a white group so it could get a charter from the NRA, which constituted an armed self-defense organization that “guarded the black community with pistols, machine guns, and dynamite.”[13] Despite the fact that black men dominated the rifle club, some black women, such as Mabel, were members of the club, even teaching their children how to shoot guns for self-defense.[14]

The actions of the rifle club were broadly successful, stopping the Klan “in its tracks” and leading them to stop raiding the local black community in Monroe.[15] At the same time, Mabel had a

11 Ibid; 2004 lecture titled “*Self Respect, Self Defense & Self Determination*” with Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver and Mabel Williams speaking. Mabel recalls in the interview with Cecelski that she could become her own person because Robert's determination in fighting discrimination within the U.S. military and in society as a whole.

12 2004 interview of Mabel Williams by Walter Turner, “Membership in the Monroe NAACP” section; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 202; Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle*, 165; Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 229; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 14.

13 Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 27; Freedom Archives, “Transcription of Self-Respect, Self-Defense, and Self-Determination,” 82; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 62, 204; Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club,” 396; Interview with Mabel Williams by David S. Cecelski on August 20, 1999.

14 Interview with Mabel Williams by David S. Cecelski on August 20, 1999; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 141, 180; Freedom Archives, “Transcription of Self-Respect, Self-Defense, and Self-Determination,” 11; Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club,” 402; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 75; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 18. Despite the fact that some women participated, they never “had the occasion to have to shoot anybody.” A picture in *Negroes with Guns* shows one woman holding a gun in civil rights leader Dr. Perry's living room, along with a number of men: Lorraine Williams Garlington. Some neighbors of the Williams family were armed as well, including a black domestic woman named Ms. Crowder, who had a number of hidden semiautomatic rifles, found by the police after the Williams family went into exile, to defend the community if the Klan came (Foreman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 207-8). In terms of Mabel's own feelings toward self-defense, she talks about old women who helped defend their community from the Klan and oppose Klan intimidation, implying that she feels the same way (Strain, *Pure Fire*, 75). In Tyson's biography of Robert, Mabel is described as telling white policeman that if they didn't leave, she would shoot them for “trying to kill her husband”; she also kept a pistol for self-defense when she was in New York with Robert (Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie,* 71, 259).

15 Nelson, *People with Strength*, 59-60; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 111.

phone club with local black women to inform others of the Klan's movements so the community was ready for Klan attacks; this meant she was, in her own words, “an active participant” and not just a “housewife at that time.”[16] In Monroe, she also went to protests, including those to desegregate a local swimming pool, organized by Robert and others, but she didn’t engage in picketing and stayed in the car holding a pistol.[17] However, she had enough stature to be elected the president of the local NAACP after Robert was suspended as the chapter's president after saying that blacks should meet “violence with violence” which the NAACP interpreted as advocating violence.[18] In 1961, after being taught in the past by her husband how to aim a gun and having some experience shooting as part of the NRA-chartered rifle club, she held off police who were coming to arrest Robert, for a so-called kidnapping of a white couple who purportedly had “a history of racist connection,” with a 12-gauge shotgun.[19]

In order to flee the fabricated charges of a “kidnapping” pegged on Robert, the Williams family fled, one by one, to the island of Cuba. Fidel Castro, Cuba's leader, allowed the Williams family to have their own radio show. The show, called Radio Free Dixie, which broadcast three times a week, was “the voice of armed self-defense” and featured Robert doing his own editorials while Mabel read news items and helped select the music.[20] By 1969, when the Williams family returned, the days of Mabel going to political rallies and a language school in Cuba were over, as were the days of rubbing arms with Chinese leaders such as Mao Zedong; in their place was the Provisional Government Conference that year, creating the Republic of New Afrika.[21] Mabel Williams represents a generation, along with

16 Interview with Mabel Williams by David S. Cecelski on August 20, 1999.

17 Ibid.

18 Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 28; Freedom Archives, “Transcription of Self-Respect, Self-Defense, and Self-Determination,” 10; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 28-9, 31; Current, “Fiftieth Annual Convention—A Jubilee for Civil Rights,” 408-10; Crosby, “This Nonviolent Stuff Ain't No Good. It'll Get Ya Killed,” 163.

19 Nelson, *People with Strength*, 69, 72; 2004 lecture titled “*Self Respect, Self Defense & Self Determination*”; Freedom Archives, “Transcription of Self-Respect, Self-Defense, and Self-Determination,” 18; Crosby, “It wasn't the Wild West,” 210; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 183, 259; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 149; Faraj, “Unearthing the Underground,” 226-7; Gibson, “Monroe, North Carolina,” 42; U.S. Senate, “Statements of Robert F. Williams” (part 2), 76.

20 2004 lecture titled “*Self Respect, Self Defense & Self Determination*”; Freedom Archives, “Transcription of Self-Respect, Self-Defense, and Self-Determination,” 6, 21-2, 82.

21 Interview of Mabel Williams by Walter Turner in 2004, “Mabel's Experience in Cuba” section; Bloom and Martin Jr., *Blacks Against Empire*, 33; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 187; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 18. Interestingly, after

Robert Williams, “a non-violent person” who believed in committing violence only in self-defense, which as Angela Davis said, “enabled the work of organizations like the Black Panther Party.”[22] To use the words of the late Mabel Williams in 2004, “now at last the story is being told.”[23]

**Women affiliated with the Deacons for Defense and Justice**

In 1964, a new group burst onto the scene, mobilizing to protect civil rights workers and social activists from attacks by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups engaging in violence by using guns. This group was called the Deacons for Defense and Justice. It was not hesitant about using weapons, despite open hostility from whites in Louisiana, had a masculinist appeal, and was aware of its role in history.[24] Other scholars have also pointed out that the Deacons were mysterious since only a small number of members, mainly the top leadership, such as Charles Sims, Ernest Thomas, Percy Lee Bradford, Roy Burris, and Robert Hicks, publicly revealed their names.[25] After 1964, the Deacons expanded to the Natchez area in Louisiana, where they defended civil rights activists, and had twenty other chapters in Louisiana and Mississippi by the end of 1966.[26]

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discussions of weapons at RNA meetings, Robert stopped coming to RNA meetings, and many within the organization saw him as an “unbelievable disappointment” after he returned (Davenport, “When Separatists Separate,” 250-1).

22 Interview with Mabel Williams by David S. Cecelski on August 20, 1999; 2004 lecture titled “*Self Respect, Self Defense & Self Determination.*”

23 Interview of Mabel Williams by Walter Turner in 2004, “Are You Proud of Your Efforts” section. Williams was actually referring to the story of her husband, but this can also be applied to her as well.

24 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 134, 143; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 100; Strain, “We Walked like Men,” 62. The Deacons, which had a name that could have originated from church Deacons, were a very disciplined “self-defense advocacy group” of “young brothers” that moved armed self-defense into the public realm while serving as an organized political movement “for self-defense” which reached into the Deep South (see Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 128, 208; Crosby, “It wasn't the Wild West,” 230; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 97; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 276-8, 284; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 18; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 54, 164; Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 474, 493, 502 for details). The paramilitary Deacons, purportedly created and controlled by the black working class, would fire back if fired upon but focused on voting rights and nonviolent protest (see Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 109, 111, 268; Strain, “We Walked Like Men,” 45; Crosby, “This Nonviolent Stuff Ain't No Good. It'll Get Ya Killed,” 165; Cottrol and Diamond, “The Second Amendment,” 357; Witt, “Picking up the Gun and Serving the People,” 22 for details)

25 Strain, “We Walked Like Men,” 43, 49.

26 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 130-2; Dirks, “Between Threat and Reality,” 89, 91; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 2, 30, 69; Wendt, “Urge People Not to Carry Guns,” 280. By the late 1960s, the Deacons had faded away, because certain gun laws passed in other southern states, and become “obsolete,” despite the continuing use of armed self-defense (see Wendt, “Protection or Path Toward Revolution?,” 323; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 135, 141; Strain, “We Walked Like Men, 59-61; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 156 for details).

Armed black women had an interesting role in the Deacons for Defense. While women did not have active involvement in southern defense groups such as the Deacons, on an individual and informal basis, black women defended their homes "with armed force," and their militancy challenged "traditional notions of gender" in black and white communities.[27] While black women were formally excluded from the Deacons, there were auxiliaries called Deaconesses where women participated along with men in target practice.[28] The Deacons were founded in 1964 in Bogalusa, Louisiana because of "numerous, and seemingly endless, assaults against black women and children," aligning with Charles Sims's statement that "those most in danger are the women."[29] Women served as boycott enforcers in Natchez, Mississippi, physically disciplining black domestics who were seen as suspected informants for the "white power structure," while others had varying levels of involvement with the Deacons.[30] Six black women were affiliated with the Deacons even though they weren't official members: Ruth Amos, Louise Meriwether, Ora Bryant, Annie Reeves, Laura McGhee, and Unita Blackwell.[31]

Of the six black women unofficially involved with the Deacons, scholars know little about Ruth Amos, Louise Meriwether, and Annie Reeves. Ruth and her husband, Henry Amos, who became the Deacon's vice-president, were working-class black folks who operated a gas station before they were involved with the Deacons.[32] Other scholarship has showed that Ruth Amos attended meetings of the

27 Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men'," 551-2; Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality," 88-9. While black women rarely participated in community patrols, they still defended their own homes and communities.

28 Strain, "We Walked Like Men," 54; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 45-6, 94, 118, 127, 290; Wendt, "Urge People Not to Carry Guns," 275; Frystak, "Women in the Field II," 206; Newsweek, "The Deacons," 28; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 210; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 83. While their role is unknown, Jackie Hicks, wife of Deacons leader Robert "Bob" Hicks, armed herself with a pistol to scare away Klan members and organized target practice for the "Deaconesses." Emilye Crosby asks about Jackie in "It Wasn't the Wild West," "how did she feel about being excluded from the group [the Deacons]? Did it matter to her? Did she feel discriminated against?" (pp. 215). Existing scholarship does not help answer these questions, meaning that more research will need to be done.

29 Frystak, "Women in the Field II," 214-5.

30 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 137-8.

31 Strain, *Pure Fire*, 112; Levy, "Sisterhood is powerful," 112-3; Frystak, "Women in the Field II," 206; Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 222-3; Crosby, "It wasn't the Wild West," 195; LeBlanc-Earnest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 306-7; Umoja, "The Deacons for Defense and the Mississippi Movement," 224; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 189, 243; Umoja, "1964," 222.

32 Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 15, 294. For some time, Henry was the Deacon's vice-president but was pushed out when Earnest Thomas declared he was the group's vice-president in the organization's incorporation papers, leading to a rift between Thomas and other members in the Jonesboro chapter of Deacons.

Deacons, along with other women, and apparently had an "active role in the Deacons."[33] On the other hand, Louise Meriwether, an up-and-coming black writer at the time, worked with the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), whose members were protected by the Deacons during the summer of 1965.[34] While some scholars claim that Louise participated in armed patrols with the Deacons in Bogalusa, in her own words, she said that despite the fact she disliked guns, she had a big pocketbook and "always had someone's gun in there," meaning she served a "gun toter" for the Deacons.[35] Finally, there's was a black woman named Anna "Annie" Reeves or Annie Colton Reeves. Annie was part of a family, which was known as defiantly standing up to white folks, and made sure that female (and male) children could use weapons to defend themselves from white racists.[36]

Ora "Miss Dago" Bryant engaged in armed self-defense of her family's home. On July 26th, 1964, Ora, a local movement leader, was awakened by the sound of a car pulling into their driveway, and she grabbed her shotgun, firing at the vehicle of a white supremacist terrorist who threw a bundle of dynamite at the homestead.[37] After this incident, Ora and her husband, Charles "Charlie" Bryant took turns defending the house every night, where their brother-in-law, local McComb NAACP leader

33 Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 46; Frystak, "Women in the Field II," 206. If she did have an active role in the Deacons, this would be odd because the organization had only male members. So, her overall role in the Deacons is unknown.

34 Danridge, "Meriwether, Louise," 292; Ebony, "Daddy was a number runner" [introduction], 98. In later years, Meriwether, a native New Yorker, would write fiction books aimed an "audience of children," with her short stories and articles appearing in many magazines, which focused on the "economic, social, and relational reality of African American lives in whatever historical period she writes," with this interest originating from her father, a "card-carrying Communist." For more information on this, see Interview of Louise Meriwether by Jayne Cortez, Nov. 9, 2003; Arnold, "Louise Meriwether," 403-4; Collins, "Meriwether, Louise (1923- ), 623; and Black World, "Books Received—Literature," 93.

35 LeBlanc-Earnest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 306-7; McKay, "Afterward," 232-3; Meriwether, "A Happening in Barbados" [introduction], 156; White, "Meriwether, Louise," 287; Interview of Louise Meriwether by Jayne Cortez, Nov. 9, 2003.

36 Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 68-9; Umoja, "1964," 222; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 23, 114. This nature of her family explains why Annie threatened white men trying to claim her father's land in the 1930s. Little is known about her "theory" of armed self-defense versus political violence, if the name Colton is incorrect (see page 278 of *We Will Shoot Back*), or if she was a maid at the Shaw Dormitory in Greensboro. For more information see Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 233 and Sink, "Moments to Remember," 64.

37 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 113; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 120-1; Dittmer, *Local People*, 266; Wendt, "The Roots of Black Power?," 156. The explosion broke the front windows and tore off the house's siding, and Ora's husband and other neighbors "traded gunfire with the perpetrators." Interestingly, the husband of Annie Reeves, Carl, protected the Bryant's family house, since Ora's brother-in-law was a local NAACP leader (see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 114).

Claude "C.C." Bryant, also lived.[38] On September 24th, 1964, Ora and other female civil rights activists from McComb, such as Aylene Quin and Matti Dillion, met with President Lyndon B. Johnson to describe their experiences during the "terror-filled summer" of 1964; at the meeting Ora exclaimed in despair that "the white man ain't gonna let us vote."[39] Clearly, the meeting had an influence on Johnson's thinking because after it he "personally contacted Mississippi governor Paul Johnson and threatened to send federal troops to McComb" if violence and terror by racist whites didn't stop.[40]

Ora Bryant was connected to another woman who engaged in armed self-defense. This woman was Laura McGhee, who, along with Fannie Lou Hamer, Belle Johnson, and Unita Blackwell, was a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegate to the 1964 Democratic Convention.[41] Laura McGhee was a hard-working local organizer in Greenwood, Mississippi, whose involvement in civil rights activist started in 1955, was named by Klan, along with her sons Jake and Silas, as a civil rights "leader."[42] Not only did Laura engage in armed self-defense but she had a reputation for personal fearlessness and defiance like other members of the McGhee family.[43] When the FBI and local police told her to stop her boys from shooting at nightriders who attacked her home, she agreed, saying she would do the shooting instead.[44] At the local police station, she punched a policeman in the jaw, or the nose, after her son, Jake McGhee, was arrested for a "traffic violation," and another time, she smacked

38 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 113, 117; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 103; Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality," 72. In later months, Ora told how her house had been bombed before the local Society Hill Baptist Church, which she attended, saying that "she and her children had no place to stay in McComb" (see Branch, "Freedom Summer," 497 for details).

39 Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 124; Russell, "Whistling in the Dark," 241-2.

40 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 117.

41 Ibid, 85; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 316. The MFDP was aiming to be a "multiracial political party" that would challenge the white-only Mississippi Democratic Party at the National Democratic Convention in 1964.

42 Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 14; Ransby, "New Battlefields and New Allies," 307; Levy, "Sisterhood is powerful," 113; Sov-Com, "FDP County Reports: November 6-November 19, 1965."

43 Umoja, *We Will Shoot* Back, 72; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 256; Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 319; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 142-3; Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 259-60; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 109; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 209, 217. While there isn't an answer to civil rights scholar Emilye Crosby's questions (pp. 214 of "It Wasn't the Wild West") of "how did Laura McGhee understand her use of self-defense?...Did protecting her family mean something different to McGhee than it did to Hartman Turnbow?," there is much more information about Laura than any other woman unofficially involved with the Deacons. Laura's use of armed self-defense, sitting on her porch with a Winchester rifle to discourage and prevent attacks by white terrorists like the Klan, showed that armed self-defense wasn't "solely a male phenomena."

44 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 72; Levy, "Sisterhood is powerful," 113.

a policeman in the eye, demanding to see her son.[45] Laura, an "unsung heroine" of the civil rights movement in the Mississippi Delta, yanked a nightstick away from a police officer during an April 1963 protest, with entertainer Dick Gregory having to restrain her, and she threatened a police officer who came on her property.[46] Not surprisingly, advocates of armed self-defense within SNCC invoked the example of Laura to show the need for armed self-defense in the South by the organization.[47]

The most accomplished woman who was involved with the Deacons was Unita Blackwell Wright. Unita grew up in a poor, farming family as a Mississippi farm worker "pickin' and choppin' cotton at three dollars a day."[48] While she was "inducted" into the movement by a religious conversion experience in 1957, she did not join the movement actively, until 1962, which started with voter registration drives as part of SNCC, making her unemployable to many local white businesses.[49] As her involvement in the civil rights movement grew, Unita and her husband took turns sleeping at night so someone would be alert and armed in preparation for attacks by nightriders.[50] By 1964, Unita was one of the co-founders of the MFDP, unsuccessfully attempting to unseat the state's only white-only

45 Dittmer, *Local People*, 279; Levy, "Sisterhood is powerful," 114; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 208; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 257; Hodges, "Civil Rights," 170; McAdam, "Appendix," 276. I say the "jaw and the nose" because different accounts of this event differ. In the latter instance, she was arrested but wasn't charged because it was embarrassing for a white man "to admit in court that he had been beat up by a black woman" who was trying to see her son in a room with a lawyer from the National Lawyers Guild (see Levy, "Sisterhood is powerful," 114; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 208, 214; Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 258-9 for details)

46 Hodges, "Civil Rights," 169; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 258; Berrey, "Notes," 254; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 88.

47 Umoja, "1964," 206. The image of a strong black woman fighting off racist attackers projected by SNCC activist Sam Block would have been complicated by the fact that Laura McGhee was a widow of a late local Pentecostal minister, Hildreth McGhee, and she was denied "welfare aid and threatened with foreclosure," even though she owned land, because of her involvement in the Voter Education Project (see Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 234, 243, 257-8; Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 289; Jet, "Step Up Drive to Aid Hungry Miss. Negroes," 15, 20 for details). At the same time, she could have been a good example for Block because she signed up for Septima Clark's "citizenship school training class" and her land was used for multiple purposes: "voter registration classes, meetings, rallies...collateral to bail out movement activists" and a "Tent City" for tenants who were displaced for supporting the local voter registration campaigns (see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 71-2; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 260; Sov-Com, "Second Tent City Rising In Delta" for details). Robert F. Williams was also used as an example of armed defense by SNCC activist Mike Sayer (see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 88 for more details).

48 Morrison, *Black Political Mobilization*, 99-100; Dittmer, *Local People*, 253; Sewell and Dwight, "Politics," 66.

49 Morrison, *Black Political Mobilization*, 108; Carey, "Blackwell, Unita," 19; Fay, "Blackwell, Unita," 539; Chappell, "Notes," 240, 242. Her "religious conversion" was not a surprise due to the importance of the Church for her.

50 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 108. Despite this, she claimed in her memoirs she claims that during her time at SNCC, she "didn't have a gun or any other weapon to protect myself. None of us did" and wrote about how Harman and C. Bell Turnbow both had guns, with C. Bell reaching into a paper bag and pulling out a pistol (Blackwell, *Barefootin'*, 6, 108).

"regular" Democratic Party, and the next year she participated in the acclaimed march in Selma.[51] In the following years, she met top administration officials, was a SNCC project director for six counties, and was elected mayor of the small town of Mayersville, Mississippi in 1977.[52]

**Armed black women in the American South**

While most women were and are silent about their decision to arm themselves, and men dominated "organized and formal" armed self-defense in the South, women still took up arms to defend their families.[53] Some black women even acted violently in their self-defense. SNCC activist Judy Richardson unintentionally kicked "an officer in the groin," Annie Cooper slugged a sheriff, and an unnamed black woman said that she would hit back if she was attacked during a march, proving that nonviolence was, to many black southerners, "an alien philosophy."[54]

There were a number of women, either unnamed or only named with their formalities, who engaged in armed self-defense in the American South in the 1960s. These women ranged from unnamed older women in Batesville, Mississippi and Lowndes County with shotguns or rifles to women and youth participating in community defense systems in the Mississippi cities of Harmony, a former town, and McComb.[55] There was also Mrs. Fairly who slept with a rifle in one hand and pistol

51 Carey, "Blackwell, Unita," 19; Dittmer, *Local People*, 367; Sewell and Dwight, "Politics," 67; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 205.

52 Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 269-70; Bevel, "Unita Blackwell," 221; Ebony, "Lady Mayor of Mayersville," 53-4, 56; Sewell and Dwight, "Politics," 66; Dittmer, *Local People*, 484; Morrison, *Black Political Mobilization*, 95, 116. Unita also was a founder of the China Peoples Friendship Association dedicated to "promoting cultural exchange between the United States and China." In 1977, she was elected as mayor of the small town of Mayersville, the first black female mayor in Mississippi history and continuing through the 1980s, she played a role in the "reconstituted Mississippi Democratic Party."

53 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 102; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 138; Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 67; Crosby, "It Wasn't the Wild West," 197, 207-8.

54 Crosby, "It Wasn't the Wild West," 215; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 147, 161; Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality," 90. Additionally, Annie Pearl Avery was discouraged from bringing a knife to a protest by her grandmother. Nonviolence was "an alien philosophy," even to local movement leaders, who practiced self-defense, an ideal which was also expressed in Black Power organizations (see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 119; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 184; Umoja, "From One Generation to the Next," 237 for details).

55 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 108; Umoja, "1964," 211; Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality," 72; Crosby, "It Wasn't the Wild West," 233-5; Pascoe, "The Monroe Rifle Club," 396-7; Wendt, "Protection or Path Toward Revolution?," 324. In bloody Lowndes County black men and women were comfortable using rifles and other guns for self-defense, a practice which was relatively commonplace. This also occurred in Ferriday, Louisiana where an unnamed black woman "returned fire when a group of Klansmen shot into her home" (Wendt, "Protection or Path Toward Revolution?," 324).

in another, the wife of NAACP member Matthew Mables who slept with a rifle, and Mrs. Jackson, the wife of Reverend Y.D. Jackson, who “unloaded her gun” at the Klan.[56]

Famed activists such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Daisy Bates engaged in armed self-defense. For Hamer, she said that she had a right to protect herself in her home, just like her mother Lou Ella Townsend who brought a 9mm Lugar into the fields, with a shotgun to drive off the “first cracker... [who] look[s] like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch.”[57] Hamer not only embraced “private self-defense and political nonviolence,” but in September 1964 she boldly declared that in Mississippi “we don't carry guns because we don't have anything to hide” and that “the cover has been pulled back,” meaning that people don't have “any place to hide” since they've already started the path to racial justice and there's no turning back.[58] For Daisy Bates, while she had armed guards, making the Bates home an “armed camp,” she carried a .32-caliber pistol in her handbag at times, and she even repelled an invader with a volley of gunshots.[59]

There were a number of black women who defended civil rights activists, who were usually nonviolent. Hattie Bell, as SNCC worker JoAnne Ooiman found out, slept with an ax “hidden under her bed” since she had removed a gun from under her pillow after “nearly shooting a neighbor's son” and Mama Dolly Raines protected “Rev. Charles Sherrod, a passionate believer in nonviolence” with a shotgun.[60] 86-year-old matriarch Janie Brewer also defended local activists declaring that “shit, we ain't

56 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 114; Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 79; Crosby, “It wasn't the Wild West,” 248. Sadly, the first name of Reverend Y.D. Jackson's wife is not known. Even Hill's 1997 dissertation doesn't elaborate on this, only saying on page 46 that “...shots rang out. It was Reverend Jackson's wife unloading her gun at the startled Klansmen” with the source as a “Statement by Y. D. Jackson” on August 4, 1964 which is in the CORE Papers, Jackson Parish files at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

57 Faraj, “Unearthing the Underground,” 226; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 13; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 94; Hamer, “To Praise Our Bridges,” 324-5; Brauer, “Civil Rights Revolutions Raise Questions,” 114; Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 74; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 11, 74; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 121-2.

58 Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 13; Hamer, “We're on our way,” 53.

59 Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 8, 183; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 25-6; Wendt, “Protection or Path Toward Revolution?,” 322; Wendt, “Urge People Not to Carry Guns,” 271; Stockley, *Daisy Bates*, 12, 78, 132; Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, 94, 96-7, 99. In 1957, she also powerfully declared what help she needed to stop harassment of her and her family: “I don't care how they do it. They can set up a machine gun in my front yard if they want to.” (see Stockley, *Daisy Bates,* 200 for quote). Bates's use of guns was similar to Rosa Parks and Bessie McAdams who armed themselves in self-defense.

60 Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 79; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 121. At one point, Mama Dolly Raines told Sherrod that

nonviolent" after pulling a big rifle out from behind a chair, and setting a trap to ambush nightriders in August 1964 which drove them away from the Brewer farm for good.[61] One young black woman named Thelma Caufield, who was only fourteen, not only used a family shotgun to fire at "a group of hostile youths" but even taught white female CORE volunteer, Peggy Ewan, how to use a shotgun![62]

One black woman who got much acclaim across the press was Rebecca Wilson, a black housemaid. In 1962, the press reported that Rebecca, the 21-year-old daughter of a 38-year-old waitress at a local truck stop, Kate Philpot, fetched a .22-caliber pistol and fired at seven masked men who demanded entrance to her mother's home, killing one and wounding another.[63] In the aftermath, Rebecca, acting "outside a movement context" was not only uncharged in the incident, a "clear-cut case of self-defense," but her action modeled the "idealized requirements for black manhood" that Robert Williams argued for.[64] Arguably, this meant that Rebecca "fought back against white racists forcibly and swiftly" and asserted her civil rights by "staking a claim to life."[65]

There were also a number of little-known activists who engaged in armed self-defense. One of these women was Virgie Saffold, who took turns sleeping at night with her husband, Jodie Saffold,

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she had brought "a lot of these white folks into this world, and I'll take 'em out of this world if I have to" (see Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed,* 168-9; Sigal, "The Important Role of Armed Resistance in the Black Civil Rights Movement" for more details). Raines, who resisted racist intimidation, defended civil rights workers, was very religious, with "strict rules" about what young women could and couldn't do and "had a rifle and a shotgun, and she knew how to use them" (Sherrod, "At Work in the Fields," 85; Preacely, "It Was Simply in My Blood," 168, 170).

61 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 83, 109-11, 144.

62 Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 73; Wendt, "Urge People Not to Carry Guns," 268. Thelma, who worked with CORE, openly carrying a gun "challenged traditional gendered notions" of armed self-defense and showed that women weren't afraid to "carry guns and challenge whites who approached their homes" (see Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom*, 192-3, 206). Frystak also writes that Thelma "epitomizes the female grassroots civil rights activist in Louisiana" (192). In an interview with Frystak, Meg Redden recalls that Thelma did most of the work at her family's house, was an "incredibly strong young woman," and that she carried a gun: "even though the movement was a non-violent movement, people like Thelma Caufield, who lived in a rural area...totally unprotected, she really did have a gun just to defend herself. She wasn't using a gun in an aggressive, violent way. She was just using it in self-defense" (192-3).

63 Newsweek, "Then School Bells Rang," 32; Baltimore Sun, "Negro Woman Kills Marauder," 1. The masked men were described by some accounts as "nightriders" implying that they were Klansmen.

64 Strain, *Pure Fire*, 75-6; Crosby, "It Wasn't the Wild West," 247; Jet, "Free Woman Who Killed Masked Ga. White Man," 4; Cincinnati Enquirer, "'Night Rider Defendant to be Freed," 36.

65 Strain, *Pure Fire*, 76-7. Likely Rebecca's motivation for using a gun in self-defense was one of survival rather than a political motive such as standing up for her rights as a black woman.

armed with a rifle "to watch for nightriders" in 1964.[66]. Other armed female activists included Winson Hudson and Lucile Hunter.[67] Winson, was a plaintiff in numerous lawsuits against Mississippi authorities and was "a personal example" that encouraged others to step up and challenge white authority.[68] Winson, who lived in a community that was known as fighting back against white rule, recalled self-sufficiency in her community and said that due to abundance of game, she learned how to shoot and could "hunt game and handle a gun just like the men."[69] Lucile Hunter was a bit different. She was the wife of a local civil rights leader in Selma, Alabama, saying that if she saw anyone come over the hill toward their house, she would shoot them with her .22-caliber rifle.[70] While Lucile's family was poor, she had enough rifle cartridges to defend them, if there was an armed attack; additionally, the family never went hungry and she was behind her husband 100 percent.[71]

For C. Bell Turnbow, also called Ms. "Sweets" Turnbow, and Ellie Dahmer, more is known about their husbands than themselves. In the spring of 1963, after the husband of C. Bell Turnbow, Hartman Turnbow, attempted to register to vote, firebombs caught his house on fire, and Hartman grabbed his rifle, firing at his white assailants, showing that he was "willing to defend himself," driving them off.[72] The fire was put out, and later, Hartman famously exclaimed that "I wasn't being non-

66 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 214. They did this because their house was one of the targets of white supremacists in Holmes County because they were housing Freedom Summer volunteers in 1964.Virgie was apparently important enough to be considered a "center chairman" while her house was not considered an area office or had high importance in a list compiled by the Mississippi State version of the FBI, the Sovereignty Commission (see Sov-Com, "Office of Field Operations: Master Code, Center Name and Chairmen List" for details).

67 There was also Lorraine Hansberry, who, with her family, practiced armed defense against white racial terrorism, which manifested itself in an armed patrol led by Lorraine's mother. But her overall role is unclear (see Gordon, "Black Literature of Revolutionary Protest from Chicago's South Side," 150, 190-1 for details). Hudson was an acclaimed activist who published her own memoirs in 2002, two years before her death, in a book titled *Mississippi Harmony*. In her book, Winson writes that in July 1964, "everyone here is armed, but it is a tension of caution, not of fear" (77).

68 Crawford, "Beyond the Human Self," 17-8.

69 Ibid, 16.

70 Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 225-6.

71 The Selma Times-Journal, "Standing up for the right thing."

72 Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 66-7; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 145; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 10; Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality," 72; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 150; Crosby, "This Nonviolent Stuff Ain't No Good. It'll Get Ya Killed," 161. This action fit into the narrative of patriarchal arguments of some armed black men that they had to defend "their" family. While the evidence is slim and few women talk about why they used guns, it is likely that armed women made similar arguments about why they used guns, but these arguments were likely not patriarchal.

nonviolent, I was just protectin' my family," making him inspirational to the black community in Holmes County but hated by the State Sovereignty Commission.[73] The next year, at the 1964 Democratic Convention, C. Bell carried her gun "in a paper bag."[74] For Ellie Dahmer, much of the information available focuses on her husband, Vernon Dahmer. He was purportedly a NAACP "leader" in the Eatonville Community in the late 1950s, and attended the Regional Council of Negro Leadership in 1957.[75] Ellie participated in armed self-defense with her husband between 1961 and 1965, with both of them taking turns "sleeping at night" watching for nightriders and intruders, holding loaded guns.[76]

**Armed black women in the Black Panther Party**

In October 1966, a new group called the Black Panther Party (BPP) burst onto the scene. The group, founded by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, rejected nonviolent protest, while offering an "alternative construction of manhood" with violent armed resistance. It is remembered for its "armed bravado and martial rhetoric," along with their armed "patrols to eliminate police brutality."[77] The BPP

73 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 75-6; 104, 145; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 13; Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 138; Cobb, Jr., *On the Road to Freedom*, 302. The Sovereignty Commission not only claimed that Turnbow murdered his current wife, called "C. Bell Lefore" in the reports, but said that he was lying about the incident, claiming that "Hartman Turnbow and Robert Moses instigated" and manufactured the incident (see Sov-Com, "Holmes County" (1); Sov-Com, "Holmes County (Second Report on Voters Registration School)"; Sov-Com, "Holmes County" (2) for details). In later years, the commission also described Hartman was one of the leaders of a push to register blacks in Holmes County, a MFDP delegate from 1964 to 1966, a member of the Mileston Civic Improvement Association and a candidate for county election commissioner in Holmes County in 1968 (see Sov-Com, "NAACP Sponsoring Voters Registration of Colored People in Holmes County"; Sov-Com, "Holmes County" (1); Sov-Com, "Holmes County (Second Report on Voters Registration School)"; Sov-Com, "Holmes County" (2); Sov-Com, "Mississippi Challenge: Negroes Hail House Vote"; Sov-Com, "Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Key List"; Sov-Com, "17,000 Raised For Black Candidates"; Sov-Com, "Black Candidates for County Elections" for details).

74 Crosby, "It wasn't the Wild West," 195. She did not declare as Hartman declared to Martin Luther King, Jr., "this nonviolent stuff ain't no good. It'll get ya killed" (see Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed,* 7 for quote).

75 Sov-Com, "Tag numbers of people attending the Regional Council of Negro Leadership held in Clarksville, Mississippi"; Sov-Com, "Clyde Kennard"; Sov-Com, "Memorandum"; Sov-Com, "RE: My Memorandum dated December 5, 1958"; Sov-Com; "Forrest County." Vernon, a Forest County farmer picked to head a voter registration drive by Charles Evers, was killed, defending his home and family by nightriders, in a 1966 firebomb attack (see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 67; Sov-Com, "Untitled" (1); Sov-Com, "Playboy interview: Charles Evers"; Sov-Com, "Civil Rights Disorders in Mississippi Within the Past Decade" for details). After his death, there was demonstrations by civil rights groups, which was unwanted "trouble" in the eyes of the State Sovereignty Commission (see Sov-Com, "Observation and investigation in Hattiesburg, Forest County, Mississippi"; Sov-Com, "Untitled" (2) for details).

76 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 66; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 104. The Dahmers "had a network of supporters" to protect the family in addition to their actions of armed defense. Despite this, on the night of January 1966, Vernon would be killed defending his family from the Klan and 41-year-old Ellie would become a widow, with Vernon's killer only jailed in 1998 after a second trial (Newsome, "Another Ghost of Mississippi Laid to Rest," 9-11; Jet, "Former Klan Leader Arrested Again for 1966 Murder of Mississippi Civil Rights Leader," 28; Current, "Death in Mississippi," 103-4).

77 Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men,'" 556, 559; Williams, "Don't no woman have to do nothing

also made self-defense as an alternative to nonviolence, with the standard equipment of a Party member becoming the gun itself, and they "took the Black liberation struggle out of a national context and put it in an international context" in Assata Shakur's words.[78] The paramilitary image of the Party appealed to many as they burst into the "forefront of American radical politics" and shattered the myth of police's omnipotence, despite internal problems and efforts by external forces such as the FBI, CIA, and local police to suppress them.[79] At the same time, the party had a "masculinist liberation theology" which helped them gain recruits, but alienated other people. The BPP also "engaged the cultural and sexual politics of the time" which paradoxically challenged and reinforced patriarchy at the same time.[80]

Despite the male bravado of the Panthers, which is accepted as the reality by some scholars and activists, women had a key role in the BPP. In some Party chapters, despite the "patriarchal view of gender roles" by many male BPP members during the Party's early years, women held "important leadership positions" of responsibility, such as in the Illinois Panthers which was committed to gender equality and treated male and female members equally to the best extent possible.[81] As the party expanded beyond the San Francisco Bay Area, its gendered image was a powerful draw for new recruits, including men and women, both of whom were recruited by party members, with some of the women, such as Elaine Brown, actively supporting the Panthers' "rhetoric of manhood."[82] While the

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she don't want to do," 29-31; Umoja, "From One Generation to the Next," 236; Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, 4; Blair, *Retreat to the Ghetto*, 90; LeBlanc-Earnest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 312. The BPP was not a monolithic organization since it engaged in activities beyond self-defense including protesting rent evictions, "informing welfare recipients of their legal rights...demanding and winning school traffic lights" and teaching three different types of political education classes: "community classes, classes for BPP cadre, and PE classes for Panther leadership" (see Shakur, *Assata,* 221; Foner, "Introduction," xix for details).

78 Strain, *Pure Fire*, 152; Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 153; Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, 16, 26, 95; Shakur, *Assata*, 203; Wendt, "Protection or Path Toward Revolution?," 321; Black Panther Party, "What We Want, What We Believe (1966)," 148-9.

79 Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, viii-ix, 15; Major, *A Panther is a Black Cat*, 24-6, 56.

80 Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 155; Bloom and Martin Jr., *Blacks Against Empire*, 342; Spencer and Hogan, "Telling Freedom Stories from the Inside Out," 360.

81 Williams, "Don't no woman have to do nothing she don't want to do," 30, 37-43, 46-8; Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men,'" 558.

82 Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 158, 163, 169.

BPP arguably had a "tortured relationship with black women" and women were not always treated as equals to men, women continued to join the organization and attend weapons trainings.[83]

While the Panthers largely remained silent about sexuality, even in their memoirs after the end of the Party, and some women left because of "vulgar male behavior," the Party presented a viable option for many women with a "space for dialogue and experimentation."[84] Additionally, women such as Charlotte Hill, said that they had prominent roles in Panther programs, sold papers like Assata Shakur, went through "the same security training as men," such as Charlotte's husband, Pete O'Neal, despite struggles against sexual exploitation.[85] There were other women, such as Saundra "Red" Pratt or N'sonde Mande, who participated in underground activities in Los Angeles, had expertise in forgery, and encouraged "women around her to stand up to the men when they got out of line."[86] By 1969, a survey by Bobby Seale showed that two-thirds of the Party were women, which counters the image of the Panthers as an "all-male, macho revolutionary group," with their influence clear in "survival and political education efforts" of the Party, along with a changed "internal dialogue about gender roles."[87]

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83 Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, vii; Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 154; LeBlanc-Earnest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 307. The first woman who decided to, as Earl Anthony put it, "join the Black Panther Party and pick up the gun," was Tarika Lewis, also known as Joan Lewis or Matilaba, who, within a year, had become a section leader who performed "a variety of duties, including weapons training" (see Joseph, "Black Liberation Without Apology," 12; Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 164; Floyd, *She's Got A Gun*, 154 for details). Women who joined the organization included Pirkle Jones who attended weapons trainings and picked up the gun, like other women, during a critical time "to take action." It is also important to note that within the BPP, women were "far from passive supporters," just as they were throughout other Black Power organizations, with one black woman, Barbara, letting Panthers use her San Francisco apartment as "headquarters for the Free Huey Movement," and others involved in creating community institutions (see Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, 39; Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is," 294; Payne, "Sexism is a helluva thing," 325; Wendt, "Protection or Path Toward Revolution?," 328 for details).

84 Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 231; Spencer and Hogan, "Telling Freedom Stories from the Inside Out," 339-40; Jennings, "Why I Joined the Party," 263.

85 Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 249-51, 257; Shakur, *Assata*, 217; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 177. Some sources called her "Charlotte O'Neal" (WSJ 2010; Goffard 2012). There is also a recent PBS documentary titled "A Panther in Africa" is about Charlotte and her husband's flight from the United States.

86 Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 272, 277, 280. In 1971, Saundra, the wife of Geronimo Ji Jaga, eight months pregnant at the time, was found dead "in sleeping bag in a gutter," killed by an unknown assailant (Jacobs Jr., 199).

87 Ibid, 234, 236; Williams, "Don't no woman have to do nothing she don't want to do," 40; Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is," 277. In later years, while the Panther environment remained "continually charged with suspicion and tension," this led to a "discussion about dating within the organization," initiated by Huey Newton in 1977, which led "an outpouring of emotions, opinions, and grievances" about the organization's gender dynamics, internal structure, and it's "relationship to the community" (see Spencer and Hogan, "Telling Freedom Stories from the Inside Out," 342; Jennings, "Why I Joined the Party," 262 for details). Powerfully, this discussion was after the "factional split" in the party between those who wanted to emphasize community

On May 2nd, 1967, thirty members of the BPP marched into the California state capitol building in Sacramento with loaded rifles and shotguns, protesting a gun control law, the Mulford Act, which was a "thinly disguised attempt to disarm the Panthers" since it prohibited open carrying of firearms.[88] This action, which some call a "gun-in," an act of "strategic symbolism," was followed by a statement read by Bobby Seale, which asserted "the black community's constitutional right to arm itself" which was necessary for its survival and called out what Newton termed "the racist California legislature."[89] This action was "bodacious," safeguarded the right to carry guns "as instruments of self-defense" and was educational not because the "gun-in" included a majority of male participants, who the media focused on, but it involved six black female Panthers.[90] The media focus is clear in the pictures of the event which show Black Panther women attending, but not carrying guns, just like a similar event in Seattle in 1969, which only shows black men holding guns.[91]

There are clear nuances in understanding the BPP that go beyond the "gun-in," including illustrations in the Party newspaper, *The Black Panther.* The Party newspaper, one of the most visible symbols of the Party, challenged "mass media representations of black women," never portraying

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programs, led by Huey Newton, and those who advocated for guerrilla warfare, led by Eldridge Cleaver, turning the Black Panther Party into what Kathleen Cleaver, allied with the guerrilla warfare sect which later became the Black Liberation Army, called a "reformist community action group" (see LeBlanc-Earnest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 316; Williams, "Don't no woman have to do nothing she don't want to do," 45 for details).

88 UPI, "Armed Negroes Protest Gun Bill," 23; Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, 17; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 172; Tibbs, *From Black Power to Prison Power*, 26.

89 UPI, "Armed Negroes Protest Gun Bill," 23; Williams, "Don't no woman have to do nothing she don't want to do," 32; Tibbs, *From Black Power to Prison Power*, 32; Major, *A Panther is a Black Cat*, 77; Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense: Executive Mandate Number One," 40; Wendt, "Protection or Path Toward Revolution?," 327. Newton wrote the statement the Seale spoke it on the steps of the California state capitol building.

90 Anthony, *Picking up the Gun*, 17; UPI, "Armed Negroes Protest Gun Bill," 23; Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 157; LeBlanc-Earnest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 308; Brown, "Women, Sexuality And The Black Panther Party"; Stern, "The Call of the Black Panthers," 10-6, Shakur, *Assata*, 203; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 144. UPI, which falsely labeled the BPP as "antiwhite," claims that there were five women present, while Anthony and Estes say that six women were present. Due to the increased truthworthiness of Estes and Anthony, six women was used instead of five.

91 Seale, "One historical poster of Bobby Seale and Lil Bobby Hutton invading the California State Legislature, 1967"; Sacramento Bee, "Unidentified members of the Black Panthers hold guns during group's protest at the California Assembly in May 1967 in Sacramento, California"; Ashmore, "When the Black Panthers Challenged Gun Control"; Kennedy, "Protesting Too Much"; Wooten and David, "Movement To 'Police The Police' Started With The Black Panther Party For Self-Defense"; Gregory, "Seattle Black Panther Party History and Memory Project." These sources were used only to obtain images of the protest. In his 1968 autobiography, Seale writes that "six sisters and twenty-four brothers" participated in the "gun-in" but that only twenty men were armed (Seale, "Seize the Time," 350-1)

women as sex objects or consumers, and offering a blend of "traditional and radical frames of womanhood."[92] Despite the fact that articles in *The Black Panther* originally framed women as subordinate, after 1968, female writers changed the game and Emory Douglas's illustrations showed "poor black women resisting authority in everyday life" along with black women carrying guns.[93] In the newspaper's illustrations, mostly by Emory, women were framed as equals while traditional ideas of motherhood were incorporated, which was part of the paper's "reframing of black womanhood."[94]. Emory's illustrations range from women in domestic situations who have brooms in one hand and a shotgun in another, a woman with a pistol on her belt, and a woman holding a shotgun with a baby in another arm, angry about "pigs banging on her door asking for rent money."[95]

92 Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns," 900-1. This newspaper included images of armed black women on the cover, had articles by rank-and-file Panther women beginning in early 1968, and included calls, from Eldridge Cleaver and others to "purge our ranks and our hearts...[from] chauvinistic behavior toward women" (see Floyd, *She's Got a Gun*, 151; Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is," 286; Cleaver, "Message to Sister Erica Huggins of the Black Panther Party," 98-9 for details). There was also a call to free Angela Davis, advocacy against a sterilization bill in Tennessee, arguments that we should care about women in jails, including those organizing against prison oppression, and the story of welfare mothers such as Norma Gist, who protected her child from racial slurs (see Black Community Information Center, "The Sterilization Bill," 4; Black Panther Party, "Untitled" (2), 3; Black Panther Party, "The unity between the black man and black woman will liberate them both," 10-1; Black Panther Party, "Black mother sentences to 10 years for protecting child," 4 for details). Gist later thanked *The Black Panther* for their support, which continued coverage of her case in the newspaper, making it clear that black parents should have a level of responsibility for their children (see Gist, "Thank you for being on my side," 2, 15 and Black Panther Party, "If you love them, you'll defend them," 2, 17 for details). Eventually, the BPP not only called for her to be freed, but they helped her son enroll in the Party-sponsored school, the Samuel Napier Intercommunal Youth Institute (see Black Panther Party, "If you love them, you'll defend them," 18; Black Panther Party, "No More Teacher's Dirty Looks," 4, 18 for details). This is likely why she was comfortable to say the following year that the death penalty should be abolished, which meshed with the Party position that "the death penalty must be outlawed on the streets" (see Black Panther Party, "The death penalty must be outlawed on the streets!," 12; Gist, "America is sick to death" for details).

93 Lumsden, 904-5. There were also illustrations of black men holding revolvers, resisting the oppressive system, during issues in the early 1970s, by Emory Douglas, Ralph Moore, Paul G. Gary, and Cisco, instructions on how to use certain guns ranging from shotguns and assault rifles, and on weapons safety (see Moore, "We will not hesitate to kill or die for our freedom," 5; Moore, "Untitled" (1), 6; Douglas, "Untitled" (1), 20; Douglas, "Untitled" (2), 16; Douglas, "Untitled" (3), 16; Gary, "Untitled," 4; Gary, "Only the Power of the People can free political prisoners," 4; Black Panther Party, "Rules of the Black Panther Party," 13; Black Panther Party, "The Caliber .45, Automatic Pistol," 13; Black Panther Party, "Untitled" (1), 13; Cox, "Organizing self-defense groups," 7; Cisco, "Untitled," 9; Black Panther Party, "Weapons Safety," 9 for details).

94 Ibid, 907-8, 912-3. Other than Emory, illustrations during the early 1970s ranged from a bandana-wearing black woman holding a shotgun, a South African woman holding an assault rifle in one hand and a baby in another, and a black woman holding a pistol in one hand (see Moore, "Untitled" (2), 6; Terry, "Untitled," 14; Unknown author, "The pigs think they can intimidate me when say Free Bobby and Ericka, but intimidation breeds resistance," 20 for details). Others included a busty woman holding two pistols, a woman with a pistol outside a welfare office, and a woman holding an assault rifle (see Watu, "Untitled," 2; Feattribe, "Untitled," 4; Burgoyne, "Art and the Man" for details).

95 Douglas, "Every door that the fascists attempt to kick down will put them deeper into the pit of death," 20; Douglas, "Listen to them pigs banging," 20; Contreras, "All Power to the People"; Living Proof, "Emory Douglas Prints in the Lazarides Shop"; Douglas, "Survival Pending Revolution," 20. After the Party split in 1972, the pictures moved away

**Conclusion**

By the later 1970s, women still engaged in actions of armed self-defense. While the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) had a "cadre of young black men armed with rifles," armed women served as security for the RNA's Land Celebration Day in 1971, celebrating the creation of a "sovereign Black republic in the southern United States."[96] There were also dynamic figures such as Assata Shakur and Angela Davis. Assata was painted as a "leader of a black militant group," who asserted in 1973 that black people must "must gain our liberation by any means necessary." She was accused of murdering a state trooper on May 2nd, 1973, despite the fact that she had "no gun residue on her fingers."[97] Angela, who asserted that "very real things...have forced black people to arm themselves," was an active member of Communist Party's Che-Lumumba Club and Marxist philosophy professor. She was arrested in 1970 on trumped-up charges of "kidnapping and murder" and served two years in prison.[98.]

from men and women with guns, and to either a crying black mother or an angry black woman talking about her misery (see Douglas, "Untitled" (4), 10; Douglas, "Untitled" (5), 16; Douglas, "Black Misery!," 20 for details).

96 Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 186, 196-7; Wilkinson, "Segregationist Dreamer," E26. In later years, women, who were part of the grassroots and militant United League, wrapped up weapons in towels they held in their hands (see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 228, 243, 252 for details).

97 Hanley, "Miss Chesimard Flees Jersey Prison, Helped By 3 Armed 'Visitors,'" 1; James, "Framing the Panther," 142, 146; Hinds, "Forward," ix, xi; Shakur, *Assata*, 4, 14, 17; Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 261; Labasch, "Black Militants Accused of Bank Robbery Scuffle With Armed Marshals in Federal Courthouse," 13. The militant group was a Panther offshoot called the Black Liberation Army (BLA). The lack of gun residue meant that she couldn't have fired a weapon. In later years, Shakur, a "recognizable female revolutionary," who had escaped prison in 1979 with help of BLA comrades, arrived in Cuba in 1984, making her a fugitive (see Shakur, *Assata*, 40-50, 52; 266; Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 262-3; Hanley, "Miss Chesimard Flees Jersey Prison, Helped By 3 Armed 'Visitors,'" 25; Hinds, "Forward," vii; James, "Framing the Panther," 138, 141, 143 for details). Even by 2000, Assata, formerly called Joanne Chesimard, her "slave name," still believed in "self-defense and self-determination for Africans and other oppressed people in America" (see the interview by Christian Parenti on October 24, 2000 of Assata Shakur).

98 Johnson, *Iconic*, 16-7; Davis, *Angela Davis*, xv, 15-6, 163, 189; Faraj, "Unearthing the Underground," 244; Plummer, "Race, Space, and Displacement," 241; Archer, "Angela Davis: 'I Don't See Myself As An Icon'"; Charlton, "F.B.I. Seizes Angela Davis in Motel Here." After a trial that the BPP called a "racist frame up," where guns registered in her name were used in a "conspiracy" to kidnap a judge and jury, she was put in prison for a short time before she was released in 1972 due to a campaign to free her from prison (see Black Panther Party, "White-on-White Jury for Angela too!," 2, 13-4; Black Panther Party, "Cover," 1; Black Panther Party; "Untitled" (3), 4; Black Panther Party, "Big fantasies used to convict Angela," 9; Black Panther Party, "Free Angela! Free all of us!," 10; Davis, *Angela Davis*, ix, 6, 65, 367; Goodman, "Part 2: Danny Glover & Kathleen Cleaver on "The Black Power Mixtape"" for details). While she was in prison, Angela spoke of her father setting up "an armed patrol in order to ensure that black people were not harassed and intimidated" in Birmingham, and asserted that "very real things which have forced black people to arm themselves" (see the interview by Barry Callaghan of Angela Davis in 1971 which was reproduced in the documentary titled "The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975"). In later years, Angela admitted that she purchased a weapon, like many others, as a weapon of self-defense against white racists but also argued in a recent lecture for "radical weapons control," meaning disarming everyone in America (see interview of Angela Davis by Terry Rockefeller and Louis Massiah on May 24, 1989; Davis "Racial Justice, Feminism and the Prison Industrial Complex"). After her lecture this

This paper charts a new perspective not considered in civil rights scholarship that focuses on armed self-defense: a focus on black women. It is clear that black women in the Monroe Rifle Club and affiliated with the Deacons defended their communities from racial terrorism committed by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists. At the same time, during the 1960s, numerous women defended mostly nonviolent civil rights activists from racial violence while activists picked up arms to fend off attacks of their family or homes. By the late 1960s, the tradition of armed self-defense spread to the Black Panther Party, which is seen by some scholars as a male-dominated and chauvinistic organization. Despite this, women participated in Party activities including the famed "gun-in," helped build community institutions, and received the same weapons training as men. Additionally, in *The Black Panther*, illustrators, such as Emory Douglas, combined traditional images of women in domestic settings with the "manly" attribute of strength, showing women holding guns in self-defense.

This paper is limited in that it only covers a very specific time period, 1955 to 1975, and only focuses on thirty-five armed black women, at minimum, over those years.[99] As a result, it is the author's hope that civil rights scholars and concerned citizens will be inspired by this paper to do their own research on armed self-defense by black women over the years.

In recent years, black self-defense has burst to the forefront. This year, blogger Taurean "Sankofa" Brown founded the #WeWillShootBack "online movement" in order to protect

year, Angela said that we should "imagine a world where violence is not central to our lives."

99 Another limit which I don't mention here is that many of the armed black women mentioned in this paper resided in Mississippi. The reason for this is that one of the main sources used in this paper was the scholarship of Akinyele O. Umoja who focuses on Mississippi. Future scholarship that expands this beyond Mississippi is important in order to more fully understand armed self-defense and how it is faulty to claim that it is male phenomenon. There are likely more than 35 women, since there were an unnamed number of women who participated in community defense, were RNA guards, and armed black women before 1955 including the black women's rifle team and resistance in St. Louis, and six other black women. More research would also need to be done on the arguments of black women in favor of armed self-defense. For the black women researched in this paper, few of them explained their reasons for engaging in such actions, making it hard to provide a full and complete analysis.

black communities from racial violence, black women are arming themselves more than ever, and black-male-dominated gun clubs have established themselves in Maryland.[100] These developments make it clear that armed self-defense by blacks will be an issue for years to come.

100 Love, “Black Activists Say #WeWillShootBack In Response to Racial Violence”; Montgomery, “Black gun clubs and the right to bear arms”; Carter, “Column” Black women and guns”; Prescott, “Black Women Packing Heat.”

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